

Although the majority of those who posted and wrote to me privately viewed the spread of “guys” as something to resist (with many noting how they sometimes regressed), others expressed hope that the phrase would indeed free itself from masculine connotations over time. One professor writes, almost wistfully, “I, for one, have always liked the formulation ‘you guys’ and wholeheartedly wish it were gender neutral. English could use a gender-neutral term to refer to a group of people (or even to individuals for that matter) . . . I’ve had students (female) be offended when I’ve used ‘you guys’ to them, but I still like it for some reason.” I think many feminists who find “you guys” acceptable would similarly like to believe that it is indeed non-sexist. It’s a powerful phrase precisely because it seems so warm and cozy. But we ought to ask what we are protecting when we claim that “you guys” is no big deal.

Sherryl Kleinman, professor of sociology at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, has dedicated herself to eliminating the usage. She argues, in “Why Sexist Language Matters” (published in *Center Line*, the newsletter of the Orange County Rape Crisis Center), that male-based generics function as “reinforcers” of a “system in which ‘man’ in the abstract and men in the flesh are privileged over women.” With the help of two former students, Kleinman developed a small card to leave at establishments where “you guys” is spoken (it’s available to download at [www.youall2.freeservers.com](http://www.youall2.freeservers.com)). The card succinctly explains what’s at stake in this usage and suggests alternatives. She reports that distributing the card has aroused some anger. After dining with a group of female friends and being called “you guys” several times by the server, Kleinman left the card along with a generous tip. The server followed the women out of the restaurant and berated them for what he perceived to be an insult. Christian Helms, who designed the card’s artwork, comments, “It’s interesting how something that is supposedly ‘no big deal’ seems, to get people so worked up.”

Most of us have probably had the experience of pointing out some type of sexist expression

or behavior to acquaintances and being accused of being “too sensitive” or “too PC” and told to “lighten up.” It’s certainly easier just to go along with things, to avoid making people uncomfortable, to accept what we think will do no harm. If you feel this way about “you guys,” you might want to consider Alice Walker’s view of the expression: “I see in its use some women’s obsequious need to be accepted, at any cost, even at the cost of erasing their own femaleness, and that of other women. Isn’t it at least ironic that after so many years of struggle for women’s liberation, women should end up calling themselves this?”

So open your ears and your mouth. Tell people that women and girls aren’t “guys.” Stop saying it yourself. Feminist language reform is an ongoing process that requires a supportive community of fakers. The more we raise our voices, the less likely it is that women and girls will be erased from speech.

[2002]

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### ***Gender Inequity in School: Not a Thing of the Past***

KAREN ZITTELMAN AND DAVID SADKER

“I heard that girls are doing fine now in school, really better than the boys. Is sexism really still a problem?” Many teachers, parents, and students are confused about gender equity in schools. They are not alone. We recently received a call from a young reporter who wanted to speak about our work “in making women superior to men.” The reporter viewed gender bias in school as males versus females. We do not. Gender bias short-circuits both boys and girls, and both move forward when gender restrictions are removed.

In the past decades, we have seen great progress in battling gender bias and discrimination. Females comprise more than 40 percent of high school athletes; they enroll in biology, chemistry, and pre-calculus courses at rates equal to or greater than

males, and they have access to virtually all colleges. Boys are making impressive progress as well. More boys are scoring higher on standardized tests, taking advanced placement exams, graduating from high school, and going on to college.

It should be noted, however, that for poor students and students of color the situation is far less encouraging. They are more likely to drop out and far less likely to go on to college. When making gender comparisons, it is important to consider race, economic class, ethnicity, and other relevant demographics. When people say “boys are in crisis” or “girls are struggling in science,” one needs to remember that poor children and children of color have faced race and class discrimination for many decades, and for these students the challenges are more profound and persistent.

So is gender bias a relic of a bygone era? Hardly. Consider the following:

*Boys and schools.* Boys are still plagued by lower grades, overdiagnosis, and referral to special educational services, too many preventable athletic injuries, bullying, peer harassment, disciplinary problems, and violence. The way we socialize boys too often teaches them that reading and academics are for girls, that “real boys” need not focus on schoolwork.

*Girls and schools.* Gender socialization teaches girls to please others, and working hard at school is part of that. Teachers appreciate students who follow directions and do not cause problems, part of the reason girls receive better report card grades than boys. But these higher grades carry a large hidden cost as docile and compliant children may grow into adults with lower self-esteem and less independence. In fact, even today more than one-third of students in 3rd–12th grades report “people think that the most important thing for girls is to get married and have children.”

*Test scores.* In the early years, girls are ahead of or equal to boys on most standardized measures of achievement. By the time they graduate from high school or college, girls have fallen

behind boys on all the key exams needed to gain entrance to and scholarships for the most prestigious colleges and graduate schools, including the SAT, ACT, MCAT, LSAT, and GRE.

*Instruction.* Perhaps one reason female test scores tumble is that from elementary school through higher education, studies show that female students receive less active classroom instruction, both in quantity and quality. Girls’ grades may be less a sign of academic gifts than a reward for following the rules, being quiet, and conforming to school norms.

*Curricular bias.* No matter the subject, the names and experiences of males continue to dominate the pages of schoolbooks. Current elementary and high school social studies texts include five times more males than females; elementary reading books and award-winning Caldecott and Newbery children’s books include twice as many males.

*Math and science enrollment.* Female enrollment in most high school and college mathematics and science courses has increased dramatically. Girls are the majority in biology, chemistry, algebra, and precalculus courses. Unfortunately, the connection between girls and science and math remains tenuous. A survey by the Society of Women Engineers found that 75 percent of American girls have no interest in pursuing a career in science, math, or technology. Why? They perceive these subjects as cold, impersonal, and with little clear application to their lives or to society.

*Parental perceptions.* Researchers at the University of Michigan followed more than 800 children and their parents for 13 years and found that traditional gender stereotypes greatly influence parental attitudes and behaviors related to children’s success in math. Parents buy more math and science toys, and spend more time on these activities with their sons. Simply put, parents expect their sons to do well in math, and not surprisingly, over time, girls get the message, and their interest in math decreases.

*Sexual harassment.* You may be surprised to learn that boys are the targets of sexual harassment almost as frequently as girls: nearly four out of five students (boys and girls) in grades 8 through 11 report they have been harassed. Nine in 10 students (85 percent) report that students sexually harass other students at their school, and almost 40 percent of students report that school employees sexually harass as well. The most common sexual harassment against boys takes the form of “gay-bashing” or questioning their sexuality, while girls experience verbal and physical harassment, including unwanted touching.

*Athletics.* Male high school athletes outnumber female athletes by more than a million, and male athletic participation is now growing at twice the rate of female participation. Although girls constitute 49 percent of the students in the nation’s high schools, they receive only 41 percent of the opportunities to play sports. Girls’ teams typically have less visibility and status than male teams, and are often denied the same benefits, like adequate facilities and financial support.

*College and careers.* Men had been the majority of college students from the colonial period to the early 1980s. Today, women are the majority, especially at two-year colleges. Put into perspective, there is a higher percentage of both women and men attending all college today than ever before. What is often missed in these attendance figures is that many college majors and careers are hypersegregated. Teaching, social work, and nursing are overwhelmingly female. Engineering, computer science, and physics are overwhelmingly male. Although women comprise almost half of the associates at law firms, they are less than 20 percent of the partners. Women are an underwhelming 20 percent of our leading journalists. Men constitute about 97 percent of the top executives at Fortune 500 companies. Female representation in the U.S. House of Representatives ranks a disheartening 69th in the world, behind Iraq and North Korea.

Although women are the majority of U.S. paid workers, they are still discriminated against in wages, benefits, pensions, and social security. Workers still do not have paid family medical leave guaranteed nationwide (although numerous countries do) and there is only very limited publicly funded child care. In fact, half of all women employees do not have one paid sick day. Women who work full-time and year-round earn on the average 78 cents for every dollar men earn. For Asian-American women, the figure is 87 cents; for African-American women, 62 cents; and for Latinas, 53 cents (National Women’s Law Center report, *Falling Short in Every State: The Wage Gap and Harsh Economic Realities for Women Persist*, April 2009).

These statistics reveal that gender bias is alive and well in our schools and society.

#### ***HELP ALL CHILDREN REACH THEIR POTENTIAL***

If we want males and females to value fairness and justice for others, and reach their potential whatever choices they want to make, we must create schools in which they experience justice—in their classes, relationships, school experiences, and outcomes. Here are a few activities to help parents and teachers uncover the hidden messages they send and start working toward gender equality in schools and at home:

1. *If These Walls Could Speak*—Walk down the hallway of your child’s school. Look at the displays, exhibits, photographs, athletic trophies, and other awards. What gender lessons are being taught to the students who travel those halls?
2. *Famous Men and Women*—Ask your child to list famous men and women from history, excluding the wives of presidents. Do their lists indicate more women or men? Does the list include individuals of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds? What does it mean when children see one gender as movers and shakers, and the other gender as spectators? Discuss with them what might be done to learn more about those missing pages of American history.

3. *Honor the Unique Gifts of All Children*—Parents and teachers who focus on human qualities, on how children treat one another, on how the world can become a better place, on opening all careers to everyone, are saying that each child is unique and accepted. When boys and girls hear the other sex described in terms of their human and individual strengths, instead of a stereotypical gender yardstick, they learn important lessons that can help undo gender stereotyping. Applauding the special talents of each child develops what is most important in all of us: our inner humanity.
4. *Check out Title IX*: You are not alone. The weight of the law is on your side. Title IX protects girls and boys, teachers, and staff, from gender bias in schools. Visit <http://www.titleix.info/> for information, activities, and suggestions. [2009]

#### **NOTE**

This article is adapted from material in *Still Failing at Fairness: How Gender Bias Cheats Girls and Boys in Schools and What We Can Do About It*, by David Sadker, Myra Sadker, and Karen Zittleman (New York: Scribner's, 2009).



## ***Reality Versus Perception***

JO SANDERS AND SARAH COTTON NELSON

Daniel Brown, an AP physics teacher, reported that he had initially been skeptical of any gender inequity in his classroom. “Maybe in other teachers’ classrooms,” he insisted, “but certainly not in mine.” He set out to prove the statistics wrong for his classroom by conducting an experiment.

He asked a teacher to observe his class and time his responses to both his male and female students. This was a gender issue that one of the earlier workshops had tackled. Just knowing that someone was clocking him during that period made him extra aware; he was all the more certain that his time allocation would be fair. At the end of the class, his colleague showed him the results: Taking into account the class’s gender representation, the teacher had spent 80 percent of his time responding to boys and 20 percent to girls. “It absolutely bowled me over,” Brown said.

He worked hard the next month on implementing strategies presented in the workshops to make the classroom environment more gender-equitable. Making changes in his teaching practice meant becoming aware of a number of gender-based patterns that are below most teachers’ level of conscious awareness. He paid attention to which students he called on, how much time he spent waiting for their responses, how much eye contact he maintained, which types of questions he asked specific students, and whether he accepted or refused called-out answers.

Once again, he asked his colleague to observe him in class. During that period of observation, he felt that he had gone overboard in his attention to the girls. He was sure that the observing teacher would tell him that he had swung the pendulum completely back the other way—that he was now spending 80 percent of his time responding to girls and 20 percent to boys. At the end of the period, the observing teacher told him the results: “Fifty-fifty, dead on.”

Jo Sanders and Sarah Cotton Nelson, “Closing Gender Gaps in Science.” *Educational Leadership*, November 2004, pp. 74–77.